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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000448

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SUBJECT: LOCAL GOVERNMENT MINISTER REASSURES AMBASSADOR ON  
DECENTRALIZATION AND ACKNOWLEDGES HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS

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Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) According to Local Government Minister Syed Ashraful Islam, the GOB remains committed to decentralization and will ensure that recently elected Upazila (County) Chairmen are allowed to function independently. The GOB welcomed USG assistance in making local government function effectively, Ashraf told the Ambassador in a May 3 meeting. The Awami League was moving ahead with internal reforms and would hold a party congress in June. The Ambassador underscored USG concerns about deaths in custody of those implicated in the February Bangladesh Rifles mutiny. The Minister acknowledged these concerns and expressed support for USG efforts to help Bangladesh strengthen civil-military relations in the wake of the mutiny. Ashraf's reemergence after undergoing surgery in March is a welcome development and will strengthen the voices in favor of reform within the GOB.

Local Government Minister Recovering from Surgery

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¶2. (C) The Ambassador met May 3 with Minister for Local Government and Rural Development Syed Ashraful Islam, who had just returned from a Center on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and Pacific (CIRDAP) meeting in Malaysia. (Ashraf noted that a CIRDAP Ministerial would take place in Dhaka in November 2009.) This was the first interaction we have had with the Minister in almost two months due to his ill health. The Minister is recovering from March gall bladder surgery, which has limited his mobility. Ashraf told us his full recovery would take at least another couple of months, but noted that he had resumed most of his activities.

Upazila Chairmen Get Green Light to Begin Work

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¶3. (C) Ashraf told the Ambassador (and later the press) he had sent a letter to Upazila (County) Chairmen elected in January instructing them to begin work. The GOB would next issue an executive order within days clarifying the roles of the Upazila Chairs and Vice Chairs. The Chairmen would serve as Chief Executive Officers of the Upazilas while the Vice Chairs will look after various subcommittees. Ashraf said Members of Parliament would serve as Advisors to the Chairmen and should not interfere in the functioning of the Upazilas. The Minister pledged that the GOB would make necessary changes to the local government law in the future--perhaps next year. Ashraf said he had discussed this with the Prime

Minister and she had agreed. Ashraf told the Ambassador he had visited several Upazilas and was satisfied that necessary logistics (vehicles, offices, etc) were in place. He said that while the law made the MP's advice to Chairmen binding, it did not include any sanctions if the local officials ignored the wishes of parliamentarians. As a result, he predicted many Upazila Chairmen would simply ignore unwanted advice from MPs.

14. (C) Ashraf explained Upazilas would take over most of the functions of the central government at the local level. For example, the Upazila Officers (health, education, engineering, etc) would report to the Chairmen instead of to the line ministries (with the exception of the police). The Upazilas would also gain control over their budgets. Ashraf noted that during the 2 years in the late 1980s when there had been Upazila Chairmen, attendance by line officers had improved 300 percent. Ashraf explained this was because the Chairmen were responsible for writing the annual performance reports for these officers.

15. (C) Ashraf explained that the Upazila Councils would be formed from Union Council Chairmen and a percentage of Women Union Council members. He said Union Council elections would take place this year after a new law was passed and the electoral rolls were updated. (Note: Unions consist of 8 - 12 villages.) Ashraf said MPs would have no role in running the unions or municipalities. Ashraf acknowledged the GOB could have sidelined the MPs in the Upazilas as well, but had decided not to alienate the parliamentarians. He predicted the Upazila Chairs and MPs would reach a modus vivendi.

16. (C) Ashraf acknowledged past local development projects had not been well thought out. To change this, the GOB had instituted a higher level review of projects. The GOB would

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review projects from four contiguous districts together, minimizing the influence of any one MP. The GOB wanted to depoliticize development activities. The Minister claimed there were lots of ideas for development projects and sufficient money but implementation was a problem. The Ambassador noted USAID's work on improving accountability and transparency of local government. Ashraf said the GOB would pursue this as part of &digital Bangladesh8 Its goal was to improve transparency, accountability, and efficiency. The government wanted to change the way of doing business. By making meetings and government decisions open to the public, for example, they would improve consistency and performance.

Welcome USG Assistance and Training  
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17. (C) Ashraf said Upazila Chairmen would need a great deal of training. He noted that few had any executive experience, adding their new responsibilities were akin to those of running a small business. Ashraf said the Chairmen would also need IT training as the GOB planned to provide digital fiber optic networks for Unions and Upazilas to provide a backbone for further IT expansion. Ashraf said the Chairmen would also need to understand budgeting. He predicted the Upazilas would become a training ground for future political party leaders. Ashraf told the Ambassador the GOB was also considering establishing district councils. The GOB was leaning towards direct election of councilors in the 64 districts, thereby creating &mini parliaments8 of 50 ) 60 members in each district. These councils would elect a Chairman from among the members, including some reserved for women.

Growing Pains within the AL  
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18. (C) Ashraf acknowledged growing pains within the ruling party. A party committee was at work amending its constitution to comply with the Representation of the Peoples

Law. The committee's draft would need to be approved at a party congress, which he predicted would take place by June. Ashraf noted the AL's efforts to account for funds spent during campaign. The Minister claimed Transparency International had determined the Awami League had spent the fifth highest amount in the campaign of any party. Ashraf said the AL had provided the most detailed accounting of spending to the Election Commission (EC). Ashraf expressed satisfaction with the conduct of recent by-elections, and said the EC had made great strides.

¶9. (C) Ashraf admitted it had taken some time for the GOB to get campus violence under control. Eventually, it had required a political decision by the PM. Once taken, this decision was followed by targeted police actions which had improved the situation. He assured the Ambassador political violence would also be controlled. Ashraf admitted that the BNP's participation in parliament had been a positive development. Concerned about a possible future BNP boycott, Ashraf hoped the controversy over Khaleda Zia's house would be handled in the courts. He predicted neither party would get much mileage out of this issue by going to the street. Ashraf said the GOB was also dealing with dissatisfaction over water and power shortages by mobilizing workers. He had encouraged the Home Minister to involve citizens more in her decision making. The Ambassador used this opportunity to discuss USG plans to implement a community policing project.

#### Aftermath of BDR Mutiny; HR Concerns and Civ-Mil Relations

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¶10. (C) Ashraf said the BDR issue seemed to be settling down. He was critical of opposition efforts to second guess the government's handling of the issue. The Ambassador stressed the importance of a credible investigation into the mutiny and noted USG concerns about deaths in custody of accused mutineers. Ashraf said he shared these concerns and claimed he had argued in cabinet for a civilian trial for those accused. The Ambassador said it was important that any legal process be transparent. Ashraf noted the Army should not be "too enthusiastic" and realize excesses would reflect poorly on the institution. Ashraf predicted there could be sympathy in army enlisted ranks for the BDR jawans if they were mistreated.

¶11. (C) The Ambassador noted our offer to help the GOB

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strengthen civil-military relations. He underscored the need to look at roles and responsibilities of different institutions, including the defense ministry and parliament. Ashraf wholeheartedly agreed, saying he had urged the PM to appoint a full time Defense Minister. The Ambassador said we would be offering support through APCSS and other entities.

Comment

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¶12. (C) During the two year Caretaker Government period, Ashraf was a voice of reason and an advocate for reform, both of the political system and the Awami League. Due to health problems he has been largely absent from the debate in recent weeks. It was encouraging to see him back in office and in command of his portfolio. In this meeting, he said all the right things. Taken with the Ambassador's meetings with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister in recent days, Ashraf's reemergence could be a positive sign that the GOB is regaining its footing after the February BDR mutiny.

MORIARTY